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FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 5736

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000209

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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI AND NEA/PD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2011

TAGS: [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: SOME PREACHERS CRITICAL OF UAEG-APPROVED SERMONS

REF: A. 05 ABU DHABI 3242

[B.](#) 05 ABU DHABI 3299

[C.](#) 05 ABU DHABI 3161

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Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶1.](#) (U) Summary: The Friday sermons drafted by a committee of scholars and Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments officials usually do not provoke public reaction. However, the sermons containing a more political flavor, like those we have seen in recent months with condemnations of terrorists and corruption, have prompted some public criticism for the first time. End Summary.

[¶2.](#) (U) In early January, the local Arabic newspaper "al-Emarat al-Youm" published interviews with Muslim preachers who were critical of the UAEG's role in preparing Friday sermons. It marked the first time anyone had publicly criticized the UAEG for guiding imams on what to say. The newly launched semi-governmental publication, cited "appointed and volunteer" preachers criticizing the so-called "unified Friday sermon" in the UAE. The preachers noted that by unifying the sermon, the UAEG had turned preachers into machines that merely relay the message to the worshippers, thus preventing the preachers from freely expressing their own opinions or proposing their own messages tailored to their particular worshippers. In the article, the preachers went on to say that each emirate in the UAE has distinct problems requiring discussion in the mosques located in that emirate. One volunteer preacher told the newspaper that some preachers have advanced degrees in Islamic Affairs, yet were not able to rely on the experience they have accumulated over the years. Another preacher from Sharjah Emirate complained that the UAEG sermons could diminish the benefit of the sermon if it did not reflect the interests of worshippers. Still another preacher said that the UAEG sermons had "killed any initiative on the part of the preachers."

[¶3.](#) (C) Mohammed al-Roken, a prominent Dubai jurist and moderate Islamist and social activist, told Poloff that, in some circles, the prepared sermons were a source of jokes and that he and others chafed at the idea that the UAE leadership was trying to dictate what was discussed in the mosque. Al-Roken said that the standardization of sermons was a dangerous practice because it took away the ability of the imams to respond to the questions and needs of people, especially the youth. He further noted that standardizing sermons did not change the nature of the people's political and social dialogue. It merely changed the venue, transferring much of it outside the mosque, which in his view intensified the danger because now radical dialogue could not be tempered by the imam.

¶ 4. (U) The UAEG has been drafting Friday sermons since well before 9/11, according to the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments. On a typical Friday, the sermon contains no political flavor whatsoever. Worshippers receive guidance about what is morally good and what is prohibited. In the past couple of months, there were two Friday sermons addressing the issue of avian flu, according to the Environment Agency of Abu Dhabi. In May 2005, Friday sermons tackled the more sensitive subject of the treatment of foreign workers in the country. The preachers stressed the need for treating all workers fairly and guaranteeing their rights. Those sermons came in the wake of increasing complaints by foreign workers claiming that their employers had delayed paying their salaries. There was no public outcry against the UAEG for using Friday sermons to address these community concerns.

¶ 5. (C) When the Friday sermons began getting publicity last summer because of their political content (see refs. A, B and C), UAEG officials told us there was no public outcry. In the aftermath of the bombings in Amman, Jordan, last November, a Friday sermon broadcast on a UAE television station said, "Our greatest disaster today comes not from the people of other religions, but from people who profess to belong to Islam, yet commit acts that have nothing to do with Islam." The sermon placed the responsibility on clerics: "The clerics should make it clear to the public that these murderers are excommunicated because of their ugly actions that violate the tolerance of Islam, and the mercy it has brought. ... This is the role of the clerics, the jurists, and the scholars." At that time, there was no public outcry.

¶ 6. (U) In late December 2005, approximately three weeks after Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed had publicly denounced terrorists as disloyal towards their fellow

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citizens, the government sermon entitled "Loving our Country" urged worshippers to "work hard to develop our beloved country and help each other to build it up." The sermon then exhorted the faithful to "fight against those who seek its corruption and the corruption of its people. We must also fight those who threaten its safety and protect our people and everything precious in our country." Like other "political" sermons, the message echoed the UAE leadership's position. Approximately one week later, "al-Emarat al-Youm" published its interviews with disgruntled preachers.

¶ 7. (C) Comment: We are not in a position to determine whether the preachers who "went public" with their dissatisfaction over the UAEG's role in preparing the Friday sermons represent a broader opinion. No other media coverage on the subject of Friday sermons has appeared. The fact that the preachers raised the issue publicly, and that the publication ran the story, will at the very least test the limits of free expression in the UAE.

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